

February 22, 2021

Feast of the Chair of St. Peter

1Peter 5:1-4

Mt 16:13-19

Four years ago I stood and stared into the gates of the netherworld.

Perhaps I should explain that.

In the gospels we hear the wonderful, beautiful, moving, touching words of Jesus. His words bring the gospels, and us, to life. But the gospels also often show us that Jesus had a flair for the dramatic because in many of the gospel scenes Jesus carefully chose the setting and the environment for His words. Such is the case in today's gospel.

The region of Caesarea Philippi where today's gospel takes place is in the far northeast corner of present day Israel near Israel's borders with Lebanon and Syria. Even to this day it is a remote and desolate area. There was fierce fighting in this region during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and the border between Israel and Syria is a fortified one.

In Jesus' day, the region of Caesarea Philippi was a pagan region dedicated to the pagan god Pan, the god of the wild and the god of nature—rather fitting given the rural and rustic character of the area.

It's no accident that Jesus has led His disciples on a trek into this region as a fitting scene for the words of today's gospel. It would have taken Jesus and His disciples about 5 or 6 days to walk to Caesarea Philippi from their home in Galilee. So you could say that they are on a bit of a retreat.

The exact location of today's gospel is known. If you google "Caesarea Philippi Gates of the Netherworld" you can see a picture of the gates of the netherworld, and so it was on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land where I was able to stand at the gates of the netherworld and stare into them.

These gates are in the midst of a pagan outdoor temple constructed to honor the god Pan. It is a rocky area, and the rocks are considered sacred, many of them arranged in various configurations meant to portray Pan's power.

In Jesus' time, worshippers of Pan would send livestock into the gates of the netherworld. If the livestock never returned, that meant that Pan had accepted the sacrifice. But if a sacrificed animal somehow wandered back out of the gates, it meant that Pan did not accept the sacrifice and there literally would be hell to pay.

So imagine Jesus and His disciples in this deserted, pagan, and, frankly, spooky place. The disciples must have been on edge, more than a bit unnerved. Here are these devout Jews

standing in a pagan place of worship. In addition to having entered a spiritually troubling place, they are also trespassing.

So this is the environment and the mood in which Jesus pops the question: “Who do you say that I am?”. In the midst of this intimidating place and likely feeling nervous and frightened, Peter finds the courage to speak: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God”. In the midst of pagan surroundings, Peter announces the divinity of Jesus. What a powerful moment!

So now maybe you can more fully appreciate the power of Jesus’ words. In the midst of all the sacred pagan rocks, Jesus calls Peter the rock. Then, standing right in front of those intimidating and unnerving gates of the netherworld, Jesus points to the gates and says that they shall have no power over the Church which Jesus will build upon this rock named Peter.

It’s interesting to contemplate this setting of today’s gospel, commonly thought of as the seminal event that establishes the Church. Jesus doesn’t establish His Church with Peter as its head in the Temple or in a synagogue. He doesn’t establish it in the comfort of His home in Capernaum. He doesn’t establish it in some place sacred to the Covenant between God and His Chosen People.

No, Jesus establishes His Church in the wild; in the home of a pagan god; in front of the gates of the netherworld—all while trespassing on ground where He is not supposed to be.

So I think the message for us today is not to get too comfortable inside this beautiful old church building. This is not really the capital “C” Church. This is the place where we come to be nourished by the Word of God and by the Body and Blood of Christ. It’s the place where we come for solace and retreat and renewal. It’s the place where we come to gain strength from the wider Christian community. It’s the place where we come to rest in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament to listen to the voice of God.

But this is not where we are called to live life. This place should be our launching pad into the wild—to follow Jesus and His disciples to the places they went. We are called to go trespass on the pagan temples of our world today, temples like abortion and war and capital punishment and euthanasia and gunfire upon our children; temples like materialism and individualism; temples like addiction and hopelessness; temples

like public institutions that prohibit the mention of God; temples like physical and spiritual terrorism; temples like discrimination and economic oppression; temples like governments that trample upon human rights and human dignity.

As we continue our celebration today, let us pray for the courage of St Peter so that we can go from these pews to the margins of our world to do our part to ensure that the gates of the netherworld will never prevail in this world.